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ABSTRACT

Portfolios are useful in developing a personal set of rules for good communication and for reflecting on one's performance over time. As a purposeful, interrelated collection of student work the portfolio shows student efforts, progress, and self-reflection. The article uses storytelling as a metaphor to show what portfolios are and what they can do. The Cognitive Model for Assessing Portfolios is described which takes into account the three dimensions of the portfolio: its stakeholders, activities, and history. Stakeholders are the author, publisher, and audience, and activities are what the student has to think about to make the portfolio tell the story. History recognizes the changes that take place during the endeavor. The historical dimension allows the inference that portfolios are chronicles of knowing. Development of the portfolio is like a journey. One figure illustrates the model. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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Portfolios: Stories of Knowing

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1991

A man is a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.

Jean–Paul Sartre

Mary Wiley was puzzled. She is a speech language pathologist from Beaverton, Oregon, who was starting a portfolio project with her students. She needed clarification. "Just what should go into a portfolio?" she asked. We gave several suggestions about things that might be included — written work, checklists, artwork, audio and videotapes, anecdotal records. Mary's expression told us that we were answering the wrong question. Finally one of us said, "Portfolios tell a story. Put in anything that helps to tell the story."

Mary's face brightened. We had finally understood her question. "Whatever tells the story! That helps, that really helps."

Mary is not only a speech language pathologist, she also is an accomplished storyteller. Her intention was to use portfolios to show how students with communication disorders were able to improve. The concept "telling a story" helped her to think of portfolios as students' stories about themselves as communicators. Since Mary holds a constructivist philosophy, she believes knowledge is something students build, not something we give them. She recognizes that no two students would have the same story. Her students' portfolios would have to reflect individuality; no two could be alike. Students should be able to put anything into their portfolios as long as it helps them tell the per-

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sonal stories of themselves as communicators. For some, this means audio tapes, for others it means samples of written communication, for still others it means information on cooperative projects that requires communication with other students. For all it means development of a personal set of rules for good communication and for reflection on their own performance over time. The "things" don't matter so long as they help the students show that they understand and practice good communication.

Portfolios tell a story

A portfolio tells a story. It is the story of knowing. Knowing about things: "I know about folktales, I know about math." Knowing oneself: "I know I'm a writer, I know I'm a reader." Knowing an audience: "I know I can do college–level writing." Portfolios are students' own stories of what they know, why they believe they know it, and why others should be of the same opinion. A portfolio is opinion backed by fact, as testified by this first grader:

I'm a writer. Here are some of my stories.

Students prove what they know with samples of their work.

Historically, artists have used portfolios to demonstrate their skills and document their achievements. Their portfolios become very personal. They are first person statements of "Who I am and where I am going as an artist." Writing portfolios, which are gaining popularity in our elementary and secondary schools, are first person statements of "Who I am and where I am going as a writer." Extensions to language arts and other subjects have been natural ones, statements of "Who I am and where I am going as a reader, as a mathematician, as a scientist. I know who I am and here's why."

There is a distinction to be made between folders and portfolios if students are to get maximum benefit from collecting their work. Much of what passes for portfolios we would call folders. Folders usually contain collections of student work, and may in addition contain checklists, worksheets, test scores and other things. Sometimes the students put them together, sometimes the teachers. Sometimes the students interact with their folders throughout the day, sometimes they are hardly aware of them until parent–teacher conference day.

By portfolio, we mean a purposeful, interrelated collection of student work that shows the student's efforts, progress or achievements in one or more areas. The collection includes evidence of students' self–reflection and their participation in setting the focus, selecting the contents, and judging merit. Activities are guided by performance standards. A portfolio communicates what is learned and why it is important (Paulson, Paulson, & Meyer, 1992). According to this definition, a portfolio differs from the familiar student writing folder. A folder is a collection, while a portfolio is a purposeful and coherent collection that communicates what learnings have taken place. Finally, the student is the major participant in all phases of the portfolio's development.

The purpose of the portfolio is communication. It is a story, a narrative, told from the student's perspective. Exhibits of writing in this student's portfolio are illustrations that she believes support her thesis:

> *Enclosed in my portfolio you will find five samples of what I consider to be my finest written work during my junior year in high school. The portfolio contains writing samples from expository, descriptive, and reflective pieces, to give you an overview of my writing ability. . . . The first poetry piece "You and I" is included to show my capability of writing within a certain structure. . . . The second poetry piece, "Blue", written in free verse, is more me than any of my other works. . . . With a wide variety reflected in my five pieces, I hope you will be able to assess my growth, competence, and college–level thinking successfully. I am proud to submit this collection as a reflection of my ability.*

The portfolio allowed this student to share her own perspective with the audience. But it did more that that — it encouraged the student to communicate with herself. "This is more me." "I am proud that this reflects my ability."

Throughout this paper we shall use storytelling as a metaphor to show what portfolios are and how they can be used to support learning. In the first part of the paper we ask three questions. We have already posed one: What tells the story? Now we ask two more: Whose story is it? And how does the story end? In the second part of the paper we present a portfolio assessment model. Finally, we suggest that students view their portfolios as a journey into knowing and that they write a narrative describing that journey. Our goal is to help students tell their own story, a story that has a happy ending.

Whose story is it?

Think of students as authors whose stories are their portfolios. As authors, they should be able to tell their stories in their own voices, saying what they want to say the way they want to say it. We are concerned that portfolio projects be conducted in ways that encourage students to use their voices, to retain ownership of the content, and to have opportunity to reflect on what they know and how they know it. These conditions exist when students have a personal reason for developing portfolios, when they participate in selecting the contents, and when they are invited to reflect on the very personal learning that their portfolios represent. These conditions do not exist when teachers ask "What should I put in my students' portfolios?" or when someone "higher up" tells teachers, "Have your students put these assignments into their portfolios and make sure they go about it in exactly this way and at this time." Such directives follow the patterns of traditional assessment but violate the premise that students should retain ownership of their portfolios.

In the educational literature, the word "portfolio" has become one half of an expression "portfolio assessment." The term "assessment" in this context is not, however, "business–as–usual" testing. We believe that a key element in portfolio assessment must be students' self–assessment, designed and carried out by the student. We recognize that there are many people interested in using portfolios as a way to assess students — and we are glad of that. Parents, teachers, principals, and evaluation specialists, too, ought to look at real student work during real activities in real classrooms. We recognize that in order to generalize across students they are going to need some similarity across these collections of work, but that also makes us ask nervously, "Will they still be the students' own portfolios, their own stories told in their own voices? Will the students attach importance to their self evaluations or reflexively defer to the opinions of their elders?" One of our concerns is to nurture constructive relationships between author and audience, preserving the integrity of each. How can we ensure that everyone lives happily ever after?

How does the story end?

Do we have a happy ending? Are portfolios tales of achievement, or are they demonstrations of failure? Don't let some insidious gnome persuade us that portfolios should contain "typical" work instead of best work, that they should include bad papers and low scores "to give an accurate picture." Wiggins (1991) says "Demanding and getting quality . . . means framing expectations about . . . work which makes quality a necessity, not an option."

A portfolio may be a story of discovery or a scrapbook of celebrations. It may be a collection of knowledge and chronicle of conquests but never, never a place for teachers to document what is unknown or insufficiently learned. It is not a ledger for recording how far students have fallen below the mean. If the students choose to identify what is still to be learned, that is another matter. The student may conclude this year's portfolio with a statement of future goals, a promise of adventures still to come. Only the

authors have the prerogative to hint — if you will — next year's sequel.

Now that we've raised the questions and revealed our biases, let's talk about how to develop portfolios that satisfy our biases. From time to time, we will refer to a model that is reproduced in Figure 1. The model is described formally elsewhere (Paulson & Paulson 1990, 1991). Here we shall simultaneously employ the model and story analogy to explain what makes a portfolio work — or fail. The model has three dimensions; stakeholders, activities, and history. The stakeholders are the portfolio's author, publisher, and audience. The activities are everything the student has to think about to make the portfolio tell a story. The history recognizes the changes that took place during the endeavor.

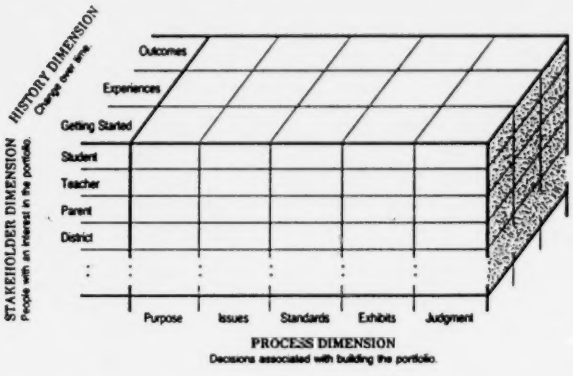

Figure 1. The Cognitive Model for Assessing Portfolios (CMAP) showing the activity (Process), historical, and stakeholder dimensions.

The people interested in the story

The most important dimension of the model is the stakeholder dimension because it describes the relationship of the student to others interested in the portfolio.

The designation of the student as author of the portfolio is fundamental. We like to think of the teacher as the ideal publisher. The publisher tells the author the nature of the company's interests and the desired scope of the work and may even inform the author regarding composition of the audience, alerting the author to the audience's expectations and biases. But this publisher leaves the author free to determine the story's theme, create the characters and events, and present the content.

The author-publisher-audience metaphor is consistent with the concept stakeholder that appears in the writing of some evaluators (e.g., Guba and Lincoln, 1990; Stake, 1967). Stakeholders include anyone who may benefit or made vulnerable by the evaluation. "Portfolio assessment" suggests that learning is being evaluated. "Evaluation of learning" is a highly loaded phrase. If the portfolio is a report of what has been learned, the student isn't the only person with something at stake. Anyone who cares enough to look at the portfolio has something at stake. Maybe it's a parent or teacher who cares about the student's learning and also takes some personal responsibility for it. Maybe it's a principal or school board or district evaluator who cares about the instructional program. Each stakeholder brings expectations about what should be in the portfolio, and is likely to be pleased or disappointed in what they find there.

Everyone — author (the student), publisher (the teacher), or reader (parent, principal, or interested outsider) — looks at the portfolio through a different set of glasses, a personal frame of reference, an individually held value system. A student may have included a composition because it tells of a deeply held belief, while another stakeholder may appreciate the logic of the presentation; another may check for conventional grammar and accurate spelling, and still another may simply admire the penmanship. What they judge and how they judge it depends on their own beliefs about what is important and how they plan to use the information.

Ghostwriters in the sky

As the different stakeholders become associated with a portfolio project, many find it nearly impossible to refrain from becoming, as it were,

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ghostwriters. They meddle with the concepts, they prescribe the standards, they specify the format.

When a group of teachers get together to plan a portfolio project, a frequent question is "What should we put into the portfolios?" Clearly, these ghostwriters hold expectations about how the portfolio story should be written. One may be interested in form, another in function; one in content, another in conventions; one in information, another in structure. "The Story of My Knowing" by A. Student suddenly becomes "The World According to Ms. Peach."

Even when other stakeholders may agree with the student on what a portfolios is to include, they may disagree on whether a sample of work is satisfactory. A piece of work viewed with pride by a student may disappoint to a parent or teacher. What is excellent by one stakeholder's criteria may be substandard by another's. Unless the student understands the different criteria, including their own, it can be very perplexing.

> *I'm doing o.k. is what most people seem to think, but my mom says I'm doing it wrong. I don't know what to think.*

Just as other people may try to prescribe what is important and how it is to be judged, they may also try to prescribe the form in which the students present their work. Often they do this because they have different uses for the information in the portfolio. The teacher may want something for the parents to take home at conference time. District administrators may want something that can be counted, summed, averaged and graphed. Textbook and test publishers accommodate them by producing materials that resemble "workbook pages to put into a folder." It is no wonder that the voice of the author is drowned out as all these ghostwriters thunder across their sky!

While it is helpful for students to know who will be looking at their portfolios and what things potential audiences are likely to find interesting and admirable, teacher intents, parent needs, and district constraints are to be accomodated only if they are compatible with the student's. The author must make the important decisions about what is to be reported, how it is to be presented, and how it should be evaluated. This is an opportunity for engaging students and empowering learners rather than for devaluing and disenfranchising them. The portfolio is a laboratory where students construct meaning from their accumulated experience. Finally, as students decide what goes into their portfolios and reflect on their accomplishments they develop the attitudes, skills and habits of self-direction and self-assessment.

The stakeholders are represented in one dimension of the CMAP diagram on page 4. The primary stakeholder is the author, the student. The other people on that dimension can be publishers or audience, just so long as they're not ghostwriters.

When you have ghostwriters, who you gonna call?

Ghostbusters!

We can help keep the ghostwriters at bay if we provide the kind of feedback that helps the student to set forth the story clearly. The more clearly the author presents the story, and the better the author writes to the audience, the more likely it is that the audience will understand what the author had in mind.

The author needs to decide exactly what the portfolio is about and make sure that is communicated. If it is a story of knowing, it may be a story of knowing something, like knowing that I'm a writer, or knowing folk literature. The story has to have a purpose; the portfolio has to have a rationale.

Portfolios develop around certain issues just as stories develop around a plot. The story's characters have goals and challenges. Portfolio assessment is the intersection of instruction and evaluation, so its issues are ones of concern to both curriculum and evaluation, drawn from a common source. (See Kucer, 1989). If my portfolio story is about knowing folk literature, what might the issues be? Should I demonstrate that I have read and thought about folk tales

from several cultures? Should I be able to talk about recurring themes and motifs? Should I show that I can identify a folktale as something unique and different from other kinds of stories?

If the author clearly sets forth the portfolio's purpose and issues, the audience will approach the portfolio's contents with a mindset more like the author's own. To know the portfolio's rationale ("To show I know about folk literature") is like knowing the title of the book. The reader will expect the contents to have to do with the author's experiences with folk literature. If the issues have been clearly stated, (acquaintance with folktales from many cultures, recognition of the most common themes and motifs, to be able to write an original story in the manner of a folktale) the reader can make even more predictions about the content, just as the reader can make better predictions after perusing a book's chapter headings. Together, rationale and issues, like title and chapter headings, help the reader predict the contents — not prescribe them.

The author's standards must also be clear. How does the student decide that work qualifies for inclusion in the portfolio? Does it have to be "perfect"? Is it good enough for the hero to intimidate the giant, or must he slay it? How many giants must he overpower? In portfolio assessment each issue carries in it an implicit or explicit standard. These must be apparent to the audience. For example, in a portfolio on folk literature, there need to be clear standards for reading a sufficient number and variety of folk tales, for recognizing which motifs and themes are the important ones, and for determining if the student's original piece is written in the manner of a folktale. By clearly stating the standards, the student helps the audience to appreciate the significance of the work. Not every one may hold the same standards, but at least everyone can understand why the student believes that the portfolio's contents are significant.

The following is from a portfolio in which a high school student reflects on voice. Notice how explicitly he describes his standards.

One of the goals I set for myself and didn't reach is finding a voice, a way of writing that is comfortable for me and doesn't sound silly and unreal to others. I think I'm going to have to experiment a little (or lots) more before I find it. I like to keep a sense of humor in all my pieces — a person, or place, or event that is a little off the wall. Sometimes I think I take it a little far: it doesn't always work. But I keep trying anyway.

The way the ghostbusters work, then, is by helping students clearly articulate their rationale, intents and standards so that others can make informed predictions and understand the students' own conclusions. They can do this by providing good models and holding conferences with their students. If teachers assist their students through the activity dimension of Figure 1 we believe they can help the author and the audience to have a shared understanding of the portfolio's purpose and issues and hold similar expectations of its contents. The final activity on this dimension is evaluation. At the conclusion of this paper we shall talk especially about the author's (student's) self-evaluation and the reflections that evaluation entails. However, since the student's self evaluation is influenced by the interactions of various stakeholders throughout the development of the portfolio, we shall postpone that discussion for a moment and look at the historical dimension of the model, also shown in Figure 1.

Portfolios as chronicles of knowing

The historical dimension of the model allows us to infer that portfolios are chronicles of knowing. Antecedents, transactions and outcomes intersect with all activities and all stakeholders. Constructs change. The portfolio author and the readers (audience) may interact in ways that lead to changes in both. Teachers and students learn together. They can change their beliefs about what the portfolio should be about, what issues are important and the very nature of the standards.

The exhibits within a portfolio may reflect

these changes. They may document the processes of learning and explain how information was acquired, how concepts were redefined, and why ideas were expanded. The author has changed during authorship. The audience — parents, teachers and evaluation specialists — also change as they interact with the student during the development of the portfolio or while they peruse the contents of a completed portfolio. The more the stakeholders are aware of each other and the more they interact, the more influence they have on each other. They may change their minds about what is important.

The succession of exhibits within the portfolio illustrates changes in the learner as well as in the things being learned. These changes become the basis for the student's self–reflection and self–evaluation. It's like an author going back and reading the entire story just after completion and reflecting on how it came to be written as it now stands — and even written at all. The student reflects on how learning came about.

We believe that every portfolio should carry some evidence of self–reflection. One kind of evidence is for the student to write a narrative that chronicles the history of the portfolio, the journey into knowing.

Knowing: The story of the Journey

The development of the portfolio is like a journey. The story of that journey is a story about the story. What we are suggesting is that just before "publication" of their portfolios, students make one final addition to them, that is, they write about their portfolios — what the portfolios mean to them and how they came about.[1] The narrative helps the student to think about thinking, to develop the practices and habits of self–assessment, to identify strategies for future use that might otherwise be unrecognized and forgotten. The narrative also is one more way for the author to communicate to the reader, "I am author of my learning. This is me and this is my learning."

Stories are a natural way to help portfolio–makers think about their thinking. The neurologist Oliver Sacks (1987) believes a sense of narrative is "absolutely primal." We discovered there are many elements of narrative in children's reflections. Linda Lewis (1990) collected samples of children's writing and then had them review these samples at the end of the year. From kindergarten through fifth grade they displayed a growing sense of story structure. The earliest reflections (kindergarten) have one character, the portfolio's author, and they have at least one pair of events with some sense of their relationship in time. A kindergartener wrote:

> *My writing used to be drawing. Now I use words.*

A first grader begins to show a sense of audience and writes a story that has a beginning, middle and end:

> *I am getting better at writing. I do capitals. Now I put space between. I write longer stories. I put periods. Lots of other things too, like exclamation marks and question marks. My favorite thing to do of writing is write the words correctly. I can spell a lot of correct words and it makes the whole story fun to read. In the future I am going to be a famous writer. I like writing.*

Second graders add characters. They include more events and more supporting details. They have some sense of cause as well as a sense of outcome.

> *I have really improved in my writing. I use capitals and periods, used to didn't use any periods capitals. Now I am learning how to write in cursive. I can spell bigger and better words now. I also help people edit at their stories. I need*

1. We are suggesting the students write a narrative for much the same reasons that Jill Marienberg, a high school teacher from Hillsboro, Oregon, asks her students to write a metacognitive letter describing their portfolio contents. However, the narrative is as concerned with "getting there" as with the "arrival".

more practice on my endings. My teacher says that putting happily ever after is okay on some stories but not for all of the stories. When I was younger I jumped around and told lots of details but now I can stay on order and tell less . Sometimes I get frustrated and mess up. But I never do that any more. I am a good writer and I will stay that way forever.

These examples were written without the students being asked to make their comments in the form of a story. Golden (1984) showed that during the first grade of school, young writers are already aware of characters, attributes for these characters, and pairs of events (e.g., chase and escape.) By third grade their stories are rich with numerous characters and multiple pairs of actions with supporting elements. Third graders' stories have a clear beginning, middle, and end.

We get students ready to write the stories of their portfolios by joining them on the journey. Together on the journey we talk, learn, and assemble the portfolio. Along the way we predict what's ahead; we discuss problems as adventures and failures as false starts. We look together for new routes around mountains. An obstacle safely passed, we reflect on what "magic" helped to slay the dragons, cross the rivers, and climb the glass hills. Finally, we join in the celebrations of knowing.

Here a fifth grader tells how his teacher took the journey with him:

I like to write stories. I don't like writing anything else. But in fifth grade or any other grade you don't have a choice. I have learned a lot about all kinds of writing and how to use more descriptive words, to make people who are reading the story get a feeling what I am talking about. I have learned how to edit my paper more than one time because every time you edit you find more mistakes. I also learned how to make a fiction story sound almost real. Mrs. ___ has taught me a lot about writing. Learning to write better seems to me to make me read a lot better. In the beginning I used to write 8 pages but now I write 12 pages. Learning where the introduction, body, solution and conclusion all go it make your story more interesting and more people will want to read it. Learning how to write better stories helps me to spell a lot of words because I am not a good speller. Mrs. ____ is a good writing teacher. I think she should have been just a writing teacher.

This student's portfolio is more than a folder, more than a collection. It is his story of knowing.

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